

The Hague
July 19, 1976.

We all face moments in our lives that we think that we have to make a decision, for example as regards a job, or the place where we will live, or our state of life: should one become a monk, or, if one is a monk should one leave the Sangha or not? (You mentioned that Phra Philip and Phra Pairot have disrobed, but sure, this does not have to mean that they are no longer interested at all in the Dhamma, now as active laypeople ?? Did they leave any address?) In short, enough problems in life which may oppress us at times.

You give an answer to problems already in the sentences you quote from the 'Abhidhamma in Daily Life' which you now translate into German: The Buddha spoke about realities as elements in order to remind us that they are impermanent and not self. (Khun Ursula, the German sounds so good, you condition many kusala cittas because of your translation. It is so direct. I also had many kusala cittas when I heard you explain the Dhamma in German when we were in Germany. You speak so well, especially in your own language. But this is the case for everyone who speaks in his own language.)

If we could remember that thinking is also an element, a nāma-element and not self it would help us very much. And all that happens to us: only elements, arising because of conditions and passing away again. Who can control one's vipāka? We think that we can plan our life and we decide this or that in order to have security in the future, or maybe to flee ^{from} akusala vipāka. We cannot flee ^{from} akusala vipāka, if it is our time we will get it in some form or other. If we don't get it here, we will get it over there, because the akusala kamma is done already, it can produce a result when it is the right time for it. And still, we would like to avoid sorrow, avoid problems, but if we want to avoid that we should not have been born. We are born and thus in for trouble, we are bound to receive sometimes kusala vipāka, sometimes akusala vipāka.

No amount of thinking can help us really, because thinking is only thinking, a kind of nāma. I was just writing about thinking since I am in the middle of the chapter on the cetasikas vitakka (initial thinking) and vicāra (sustained thinking). I quote what I have written:

Don't we attach great importance to thinking, although it is only a conditioned dhamma? Sometimes we feel the need for quietness in order to think, to contemplate about our life,

our career, our future. Or we want to ponder over an important decision we have to make. We believe that we can plan our life by thinking of the future. Thinking will not change our life at all since everything that happens occurs because there are conditions for it. Who can prevent nāmas and rūpas from arising? More helpful than thinking is mindfulness of any reality which appears right now through one of the six doors, even though it be for the duration of a 'fingersnap'. Such a moment which can arise any time, also when we are very busy, is more precious than days of contemplation in solitude. At such moments paññā is being accumulated and paññā can change our life for the better.....

Thinking is done mostly with akusala cīttas, and thus what good can come from thinking ^{about} a decision in life? We think anyway because it is our nature, but if we would like to do the right thing at this or that moment in life, there is only one way: mindfulness of any nāma or rūpa which appears. This will bring some detachment from the self and will teach us to see that all these moments of gain and loss, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, happiness and misery are only brought about because of conditions, ^(they are) conditioned elements and we cannot change them. I am writing this (and all my letters) to remind myself as well, I must add this: It will teach us some 'impartiality' (tatra-majjhataṭṭā, also the word upekkhā is sometimes used, but it is not the upekkhā which is indifferent feeling. It is a cetasika which 'keeps the middle', equanimity). ^(or equanimity) Impartiality (towards people and things which happen, not expecting anything, ^{not} expecting anything from other people and also not expecting kusala vipāka in life, as Khun Sujin always would stress.

I have a lot of confidence that when you are intent on kusala, and mindfulness is being developed, not for one or two years, but on and on, even though you don't see much progress, only a little progress, you will see that you don't have to plan this or that (you can't anyway) but problems just work out by themselves, maybe in a way different from what you expected. When kusala is being developed there is less chance that you do the wrong thing, take the wrong decision.

You may wonder, how can it help me now, if there is a moment of mindfulness of seeing as just the experience of visible object and of visible object as only visible object, no thing in it,

no person in it. Or if there is awareness of unpleasant feeling as only a kind of experience, only a kind of nāma , different from the hardness which may appear (isn't there hardness appearing too?) Yes it does help: 'The Buddha often spoke about realities as elements in order to remind us that they are impermanent and not self (Oft sprach der Buddha über Wirklichkeiten als Elemente um uns daran zu erinnern dass sie vergänglich und Nicht-Selbst sind.) We may find unpleasant feeling very important, but at the moment of mindfulness we are learning that it is only an element. Nāma and rūpa appear one at a time and we are learning to be aware of them one at a time. We are so used to join them together. For example in the case of painful feeling we join nāma and rūpa (bodily phenomena which also appear) together. Through awareness there can be less the idea of: my painful feeling.

Awareness teaches us ^(equanimity or) 'impartiality' (tatra-majjhataṭṭā) towards the object which appears. We cannot tell ourselves: we must have more impartiality towards the events of our life, no matter what happens. However, this impartiality is in the nature of the kusala citta; it is a sobhana cetasaṅga arising with every sobhana citta. When there is dāna or sīla there is pure kusala, no partiality towards the object. When there is generosity and you give you do not think at such a moment: I must give to this person, not to the other person, because you just give. Later on thoughts of partiality may arise, but not at the moment of the kusala citta which performs dāna. Vipassanā is the best way to cultivate ^(equanimity or) impartiality. Awareness of any nāma or rūpa which appears in order to see it as an element.

Is it not lack of confidence ^(in awareness, confidence) that awareness can help us right now, which may be a hindrance to the arising of sati? But confidence can grow and the more we have confidence in sati the more it will arise. Maybe one gets discouraged when there are no spectacular results of the practice in the course of years. We should not expect spectacular results but everyone can prove for himself whether sati is helpful right at this moment if it arises. He can check whether the citta is kusala or akusala and whether sati conditions more kusala in life and less akusala.

You have someone right near you who has a lot of equanimity. There are many seemingly insignificant events I remember now which happened in the years I was in Bangkok and I accompanied Khun Sujin often. Now I seem to understand better the value of these experiences. For example, I was worrying that the printer

did not let us know how far he got with the printing of my book. Khun Sujin just said: 'No news' (Mai mi kaw). 'No news' and that is all, things like that happen all the time, conditioned elements again. Khun Sujin is not only teaching Dhamma by what she says, she is also a doer of the teachings. In the suttas it is often stressed that the good teacher should also practice what he teaches, but how difficult this is. That is why teaching Dhamma is difficult.

You write that there are now less people in her wednesday class, but Khun Sujin does not mind at all, she knows that these things just happen because of conditions. Sometimes there are many people, sometimes few, impartiality.

Phra Dhammadharo wrote to me in his last letter about impartiality and partiality in the situation of those who explain the Dhamma. I want to quote it for the benefit of my friends in different countries who like to explain the Dhamma to relatives and friends and who may feel frustrated at times. Phra Dhammadharo writes:

Just lately 2 topics have been receiving a lot of attention in our discussions here in Adelaide, one is that of respect and the other 'equanimity' (tatra-majjhataṭṭā)... I remember often the sutta which you quoted in 'Letters from the Hague' and I tend to tie it up rather with the matter of respect too, that is, respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, particularly as it is expressed in a marvellous sutta about teaching Dhamma which appears in the Kassapa-Saṃyutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya. It reminds me-and how I need to be reminded too- that it is not my Dhamma, that I did not discover it (bujjhitaṃ)-- when I forget, then my partiality for honour and praise really shows itself. Further, on this matter of partiality and its delightfully sobhana opposite, I remember more and more too now some very helpful words of Khun Sujin (which may or may not be familiar to you) when she reminded us all one day of the danger of the tendency to try to 'corner' people in Dhamma discussion. How well I know it-- it comes of partiality for being right all the time! How eager we are for gain! If it is not our anxiety to prove ourselves in verbal encounter right now then we seek for signs of progress in the new Dhamma student in the days and weeks that follow as somehow confirming our value and worth as knowledgeable and capable Dhamma-farers and teachers.

Now and again, fortunately, one is able to say or do what is helpful and not to insist on seeing some result. And how much better off are all concerned! Kusala does its job within the practitioner-- and if the 'recipient' has the right accumulations, then that kusala can perhaps be a condition for him too, sooner or later, to benefit in some way or other, even though it might not be obvious to anyone (including himself) at the time...."

This was Phra Dhammadharo's letter and what a good reminder for all of us. It is not only in regard to honour or dishonour that impartiality is so helpful, also in regard to the other 'worldly conditions': also in regard to blame and praise, gain and loss, happiness and misery. There can be days of loss, everything seems against us and we find ^{ourselves in} miserable circumstances. Through the cultivation of mindfulness there can be impartiality to whatever happens to us. Phra Dhammadharo mentioned Kassapa and he was an example of equanimity. He practised all thirteen 'Dutangas' (Austerities a monk can practice with regard to the requisites, they are described in the Visuddhimagga). He had accumulations for 'fewness of wishes', he did not expect anything, whatever he received in almsfood, whatever lodging he had, it was fine for him.

You asked me to write about saññā, right saññā and wrong saññā. I wrote about saññā in Chapter IV of my cetasika series and you could ask whether Pinna who types them can lend you a copy. Saññā is not identical with the conventional term of memory. Saññā arises with every citta and 'marks' the object or recognizes the object. We attach so much to 'our saññā' and find it so important to remember 'stories' or concepts. But what is more important, the fact that we can remember a concept or the fact that - saññā arises with kusala citta? There is saññā with every moment of citta, also when we, as we say in conventional language, do not remember something. At such moments many different cittas are arising and falling away and different saññas mark different objects, because no citta without an object, also when we 'forget' something. We should study the cittas which saññā accompanies (every citta), because the conventional term of memory will not help us much with the understanding of the reality of saññā. Akusala - saññā is the saññā which accompanies akusala citta and this saññā is quite different from right remembrance which is saññā accompanying kusala citta. Saññā accompanying the citta which cultivates vipassanā is the best of all, it can be the saññā which 'perceives' the impermanence of conditioned realities. It remembers rightly. Saññā is different from sati, each cetasika has its own task. I write about this in Ch. IV.

When there is right awareness, sati is mindful of the nāma or rūpa which appears, saññā 'marks' or 'remembers' it in the right way (the kusala way since it is kusala saññā) and paññā realises its characteristic as nāma or as rūpa, not self.

When people complain about lack of memory, they are thinking merely of the conventional term of memory, they do not realise that there is still saññā, arising and falling away with every citta. The fact whether we remember a concept or 'story' or not is not so important, more important is whether there is kusala citta which is necessarily accompanied by kusala saññā. We are nāma and rūpa, and nāma conditions rūpa and rūpa conditions nāma. When we become weaker and older it may happen that some things are remembered less well, but again, what is the most important? If there is mindfulness there is kusala saññā. Moreover, it is not necessarily so that when we are weak in body our memory will be weak.

You write about your husband:

'Khun Anan drives now nearly every day to Gang-Koi, 120 km. from Bangkok. Since he studies Dhamma he thinks he can look after 1000 workers with kusala citta. He said he talks Dhamma to them.'

I read this to Lodewijk. This is the right attitude in life.

Kindest regards,

Nina.